

THE CAPITAL FROM ZAGREB CATHEDRAL, CA. 1200 – A UNIQUE WITNESS OF A CULTURAL CHANGE

S u m m a r y

One of the most intriguing pieces in the Museum of Croatian History in Zagreb is a capital with animal heads dated to ca. 1200, most likely from the Romanesque Cathedral of Zagreb. The capital is constructed in three layers. At the lowermost one, the core of the capital transforms itself from a circle into a square. The corners bear animal heads (most likely birds, possibly eagles) sitting on the tips of the leaves decorating the lowermost zone and curving away from the body of the capital. This clash of light and dark, open and closed, fluid and static is what makes the capital a very satisfying work of art.

The most important project in the medieval Continental Croatia was certainly Zagreb Cathedral. Most important, but also until the second half of the 13th ct., the most mysterious one. The Romanesque cathedral was dedicated in 1217, and seriously damaged, in 1242 during the Tartar invasion. Count Kulmer, the owner of Medvedgrad and Šestine, donated the capital to the National Museum so it was assumed that the capital came from the Medvedgrad fortress. The Hungarian scholar, Tibor Rostas was the first to state that the capital may have belonged to the Cathedral.

An identical capital is built into one of the walls of a chamber in the royal castle at Esztergom. One must underline that both "twins" are very high quality pieces, harmonious products of a royal workshop. There are analogies also with a number of vegetal capitals from Esztergom sharing detail with the twins, and obviously products of the same workshop, as well as similarities with some other sites, e.g., the vegetal capitals from Pilisszentkereszt. A capital from Óbuda should be added to the group. Given the dating of the Hungarian examples all those works, the capital from Zagreb included, could be dated around 1200 as fine works of the Late Romanesque/Early Gothic art practiced in the Royal Domain, and by the workshops connected to it throughout the Kingdom.

In all those terms the capital assumes an importance out of proportion with its role as a fragment of architectural sculpture. It is a beacon of a cultural change which was instituted by building of the Esztergom Cathedral by King Bela III and Archbishop Hiob, where the new "transitional style" was introduced in the second half of the 12th ct. The great building site of Esztergom Cathedral (1190 and later) became the polygon for creating and spreading the art of the Court workshops throughout the Kingdom, an art not any more Romanesque, not yet Gothic, yet fresh and fascinating in its adherence to the *genius loci*. After the conflict between King Emerik and his brother Andrija, this cultural upsurge resumes under the patronage of the latter as he became Andrija II, and his sons Bela IV and Bela's brother, Herceg Koloman. Together with the bishop of Zagreb, Stjepan II,

Herceg Koloman is to be credited with a true "mini-Renaissance" in Southern Pannonia, the key monuments of which are Zagreb, Medvedgrad and Čazma.

The capital in question is one, if not *the* one, among the beacons of this immense cultural change in Southern Pannonia, its southwestern section, *the Pannonia Savia*, in particular – a decisive step in defining the land's new cultural landscape. Thus even an isolated monument may shed an important light on the history and activity of royal workshops in *Pannonia Savia*, which, in terms of the entire cultural picture means a closer adherence to what was happening in the culture of the central lands of the kingdom.

Figural stone sculpture requires good stone, capable masters and a lot of time. Briefly, it is *very expensive*. The stone in Continental Croatia is mostly mealy sandstone, very bad for carving. This is one of the reasons why the examples of Romanesque figure sculpture appear as *membra disiecta*, difficult to classify and date. Autarchy and poor communications mean also depending on local traditions – pre-Historic, Roman, Roman provincial, migration period. In vain would we look for anything like "Romanesque Humanism", i.e., figuration that may be stylized and subject to the rules of ornament and architectural frame, but still recognizable as human and narrative, or even reflecting the humanist approach of classical sculpture. Such needs milieus open to new ideas and foreign masters. And this, Continental Croatia before ca. 1200, is not. The only exceptions are the "classicist" *Stone from Belec*, and the two heads from Gora. The sculpture of Rudina, as expressive and as attractive as it may be to some that like the frank primitivism of rural milieus, verges on nightmarish grotesque although some of its pieces (e.g., the "Little Girl") breath a deeply felt naive humanity. This deep involvement with the wilderness remains even when sculptors work for a respectable foreign patron, such as the Canons of the Holy Sepulcher in Glogovnica. The 12th ct. Romanesque figuration in Continental Croatia is an art of a wild, hard land, ruled by autarchy and lack of communications, being slowly led toward civilization. Hardly anywhere else is the Romanesque so typically local and steeped in local tradition of small units of human life lost in endless eternal forests. In all that, figuration very appropriately underlines the hard nature of the land and people that created it.

As the roads cut through the woods and the hills, as the settlements grow bigger and easier to reach, as connections improved, as some of the inhabitants got "out of the woods," and closer to the "big white world", the sculpture, so also the figure one, opens up. This is witnessed by the achievements of the Savian "mini-Renaissance" of the first half of the 13th ct. and its more "humanized" monuments of Zagreb, Medvedgrad, and Čazma. As the strange creatures of the capital from Zagreb, modeled on a capital from Esztergom, testify, the artist has not given up Romanesque type of stylization, but it has been regularized, methodized, divested of its earlier randomness.

Romanesque figural sculpture of Continental Croatia before the Tartar could be on one hand seen as a bunch of scattered fragments with only one larger whole – Rudina—about which it is very hard to speak in terms of quality, sources and influences. Yet, in general, it seems that figuration in the Romanesque sculpture of Continental Croatia goes hand in hand with the cultural landscape of the 12th and the 13th centuries,

Do artistic styles and practices change gradually or suddenly? Evolution or revolution? Probably both, plus innumerable possibilities in between. The art history has never

been fully capable of explaining such phenomena as Giotto, Masaccio, Caravaggio, or similar changes *ex nihilo* perpetrated by a flash of genius of a great individual. Our capital from Zagreb is certainly not a revolutionary piece in terms of art history of South Central Europe; it is a good quality piece of almost mass production. But its sudden appearance, given that it represents a family of like objects that have disappeared, is an incredibly graphic indication of the change under way around 1200.

Key words: Zagreb, Esztergom, Medieval sculpture, Romanesque, Southern Pannonia, Continental Croatia

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